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Statewide Tourism Awards Presented at Governor's Conference

(HELENA) – Three statewide tourism award winners were honored for their achievements by the Montana Tourism and Recreation Industry at the 2008 Montana Governor's Conference on Tourism and Recreation held in West Yellowstone, April 17-18. Tourism award winners are selected for their outstanding contributions to Montana's tourism industry.

"Montana is filled with hard-working people" said Governor Brian Schweitzer, "It is gratifying to be able to take the opportunity to recognize these folks individually and collectively for the good work they do on behalf of all of us and Montana's tourism industry."

"Montana's tourism industry plays a critical role in Montana's economy," said Commerce Director Anthony Preite, "Over 10 million people visited Montana last year, and they spent nearly \$3 billion dollars during their stay. Many of these visitors came to Big Sky Country because of the outstanding efforts of our tourism industry."

2008 Tourism Award Winners

Marysue Costello—Tourism Person of the Year
Fort Benton Summer Celebration—Tourism Event of the Year
West Yellowstone Winter Trails—Tourism Partnership of the Year

Marysue Costello, Executive Director of the West Yellowstone Chamber of Commerce, received the **Tourism Person of the Year** Award. For the past twenty-five years, Costello has dedicated herself to the tourism industry in her community, region and the state overall.

In announcing Costello's award, Governor's Tourism Advisory Council member, Stan Ozark noted that her 54 letters of support that accompanied her nomination were "a mighty testament to the impact she has had on her community and our industry." She was one of the original architects of the statewide bed tax instituted in 1987. In addition to her Executive Director position, she has previously worked in hotel marketing and is a dedicated community volunteer

devoting countless hours over the years to events in the West Yellowstone area. Costello is also a valuable mentor to others in the industry and is a consummate professional in all her business dealings.

In recognition of a small town with a big heart and an even bigger celebration, the **Tourism Event of the Year** honored the **Fort Benton Summer Celebration**.

In the thirty years since its inception, this event has grown from a ½ day affair to a 2 ½ day celebration that brings upwards of 10,000 visitors to this river-side community. Many organizations have partnered together to make this event a success year after year including civic groups, private businesses, city, county and federal government entities, non-profit museum boards, tribal nations as well as international performance groups.

In presenting this award, it was noted that “the diversity of events offered along with the seamless execution of the stream of activities and performances is commendable. This entirely volunteer effort has become a tradition for generations of families and is a genuine source of community pride.”

The **Tourism Partnership of the Year** award was presented to the **West Yellowstone Winter Trails**. This partnership has contributed to Montana’s world-wide recognition as a winter destination. The ski trails that are a result of this collaboration are world re-known and the snowmobile trails are annually ranked as the “best groomed” and “best signed” in the west. Over the years, nearly two million visitors have benefited from the efforts of this alliance which has produced significant annual revenue that contributes to the economic vitality of West Yellowstone and the state as a whole.

The success of this trail system requires the collaboration of a variety of partners including: the Hebgen Lake Ranger District of the US Forest Service; the town of West Yellowstone; the Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks Trails Program; and the Trail and Trash Recovery and Recycling Project. In addition, the trails rely heavily on the support of the local businesses of West Yellowstone through their innovative “Fair Share” local funding program whereby local businesses recognizing the economic importance this partnership brings to the health and vitality of West Yellowstone in the winter contribute a reasonable “fair share” of their winter income toward trail maintenance efforts. This past winter, over 100 businesses contributed over \$55,000 through this program.

These awards are presented annually to individuals, events, partnerships and communities whose efforts to promote or develop Montana's tourism opportunities have preserved or enhanced tourism's role in Montana's economy. A list of previous award winners can be found at: <http://travelmontana.state.mt.us/conference/awards.asp>.

Tourism and recreation is one of Montana’s leading industries. In 2007, over 10.6 million people visited Montana spending over \$2.9 billion during their stay. Over 48,000 jobs are supported by nonresident travel, resulting in over \$1 billion in total personal income for Montana residents.

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